

Fifty Years Ago Today: A Personal Memory

MICHAEL ANDREW CASAMENTO

During my youth when living on Ravenswood Road every kid in my Riverdale, Maryland neighborhood had a bicycle, and I was no exception. I had lived in the neighborhood since I was four and all my earliest childhood memories originate there. I'm sure I went through three or four bikes during those years, my first being a small Huffy with training wheels, and later upgrading to the most popular of them all, a Schwinn! It was great fun to ride around the neighborhood and quite an adventure to travel several blocks or maybe even a mile or two. I remember my mother was quick to take bike privileges away whenever she felt discipline was needed, and I acquired my share of cuts, scrapes and bruises from those bike riding days. I would often ride until I was exhausted and my body ached all-over.

Former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld in his biography perfectly shares the same feelings I once had in writing about the same subject:

My red Schwinn, it seemed the most perfect thing in the world. For kids in our neighborhood, our bikes were freedom. We could go anywhere we wanted. At least until it was time to come home. ~ Rumsfeld, Donald, Known and Unknown, A Memoir, Sentinel, 2011, p. 42

It was always the "in" thing, to have a clean, fancy, shiny bicycle. Bicycles to us kids in those days were much like cars in the years to come; a necessary mode of transportation, much more so than they were to my own children. I would often visit the local Schwinn bicycle shop not far away to look at, to dream of, and to plan for bigger and more expensive models. Sometime when I was about 13, I owned the Schwinn Stingray, with it's high-rise handlebars, a 20 inch rear tire with a smaller one up front, a banana seat and a five-speed shifter on the bar between my legs. I became pretty efficient at pulling "wheelies" with it and could travel half a block or more before losing momentum. Eventually I would graduate to a 26 inch ten-speed before my days as a kid, riding bikes with my friends, would come to an end.

By-far one of the most memorable experiences of my entire life involved a friend I came to know when I was eight years old. His name was Michael Andrew Casamento. I was nine months older than Michael, the son of John and Theresa Casamento, and one of two children of a young Catholic family that had moved into the area sometime around the transition between 1960 and 1961. As a coincidence, we would learn Michael was born in the same hospital as I in the little town of Clearfield, Pennsylvania, some 200+ miles away. In my research many years later I would learn the Casamentos had deep roots in that area. Michael's grandparents Tindaro and Maria had immigrated from Italy and settled in my family's Pennsylvania hometown.

Michael and I became good pals and we would spend much of our time together biking around the neighborhood. His house was just a few doors down and across the street from our apartment building on Ravenswood Road. One day his parents gave him a brand new bicycle which, as I recall, was rather big for a boy his size. Bigger than my own which was several inches smaller.

A short time later we were riding one Sunday afternoon April 30, 1961 just a couple of blocks from home. It was a typically beautiful spring day, sunny and warm. I had stopped momentarily near the crest of a hill on Rittenhouse Street to adjust the buckle on a shoe I was wearing. I hopped back on and began peddling fast and furious in my effort to catch up. A short distance ahead I watched Michael coast down the short hill and pass through an "uncontrolled" intersection with no stop

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signs, at the bottom. Suddenly a car driven by a local well-known plumber, John C. Dorsey, came through the intersection from the left and struck Michael on his bicycle. I still remember vividly the sound of his bike as it broke into pieces and watching Michael's body thrown across the street and falling to the lawn of a corner house.

I slammed on my brakes and surveyed the scene. I could hardly breathe and was momentarily overwhelmed with the sights and sounds of those few seconds. As a neighbor and Mr. Dorsey rushed to Michael's aid I turned around and rode as fast as I could to his house, back up the hill on Rittenhouse and a right turn onto 48th Avenue. A block later as I turned left, returning to our street, I passed Michael's younger sister Sandy at the corner and shouted to her as I passed "Michael's been hit by a car!" Climbing the stairs to their front porch I pounded on the open screen door and shouted inside repeating to his parents what I had just told Sandy moments before. His dad rushed out the door and leaped from their porch yelling frantically "Where? Where?" I said "Down the hill on Rittenhouse Street!" I struggled on my bike to keep up with Michael's father as he ran like a racehorse to his son's side. Michael's mother arrived soon behind as I watched from a short distance away.

It's a horrific scene I will never forget; to see the terrible panic those parents suffered in their attempt to protect and comfort their young son as they waited for aid to arrive. In later years, having experienced and understanding the joys of being a father myself, I can only imagine the horror and fear that these young parents suddenly faced that dreadful day. I stayed nearby and watched as Michael was treated and rushed into the ambulance that transported him to Prince George's General Hospital. With neighbors I would help gather pieces of his shattered and bent bicycle and saw small patches of bright blood-stained grass. Then, sick to my stomach and bewildered, I rode my bike home alone to an empty apartment, while my mother was away at work, and cried myself to sleep.

In the early morning hours of the next day, on Monday May 1, 1961, Michael died of head and internal injuries. He was only seven and a half years old. I recall my mother and I, an evening or two later, visiting the local Chamber's Funeral home and seeing Michael's lifeless body in the small satin-lined casket. Wearing a dark suit his hair was neatly combed and rosary beads draped in his hands. In front sat an altar where family and friends of his Catholic faith knelt and said their silent prayers. It was hard for me as a young impressionable boy to deal with the reality, the loss and finality that scene contained. Other than at my father's viewing, which I was too young to remember, it was my first experience of such a grim and very sad occasion that is forever etched in my memory. There were no grief counselors at school in those days, so I was left to my own means to deal with what was a very troubling, personal event. Even today, as I recall the details of those days, it's always an emotional experience.

Within days I would be interviewed by police and later by lawyers, and in time would testify in court about my memories of that day. Charges of failing to reduce speed to avoid a collision were made against Mr. Dorsey but with court delays I never did hear about the outcome. Eighteen months later we would move from that apartment building and I would never see the Casamentos again. From time-to-time I come across the name of the Casamento family whose members still live in the Clearfield area.

To my way of thinking it's a sad reminder to know that the intersection where Michael lost his life, and the houses that once stood nearby, no longer exist. Even the short stretch of street along 48th Avenue, between Rittenhouse and Ravenswood is no longer there. Only a metal guardrail and a concrete barrier mark where the street once was. All were erased by construction of a widened road and a new overpass for what became an extension of East West Highway or state highway 410. But, as recently as three years ago I saw Michael's house and those same steps I climbed to

the porch -- much as it was so long ago. The apartment building where I once lived remains there as well. All a reminder of those first childhood memories, the good times as well as the bad.

Throughout my life since that day in 1961, with the coming of each and every spring season, and often many times between, I'm reminded of that event that happened fifty years ago today. I often wonder, what happened to the Casamento family and would I one day see my friend Michael again?

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